Johann von Goethe to Charlotte von Stein

June 17, 1784

My letters will have shown you how lonely I am. I don't dine at Court, I see few people, and take my walks alone, and at every beautiful spot I wish you were there. I can't help loving you more than is good for me; I shall feel all the happier when I see you again.

I am always conscious of my nearness to you, your presence never leaves me. In you I have a measure for every woman, for everyone; in your love a measure for all that is to be. Not in the sense that the rest of the world seems obscure to me, on the contrary, your love makes it clear; I see quite clearly what men are like and what they plan, wish, do and enjoy; I don't grudge them what they have, and comparing is a secret joy to me, possessing as I do such an imperishable treasure.

You in your household must feel as I often do in my affairs; we often don't notice objects simply because we don't choose to look at them, but things acquire an interest as soon as we see clearly the way they are related to each other. For we always like to join in, and the good man takes pleasure in arranging, putting in order and furthering the right and its peaceful rule.

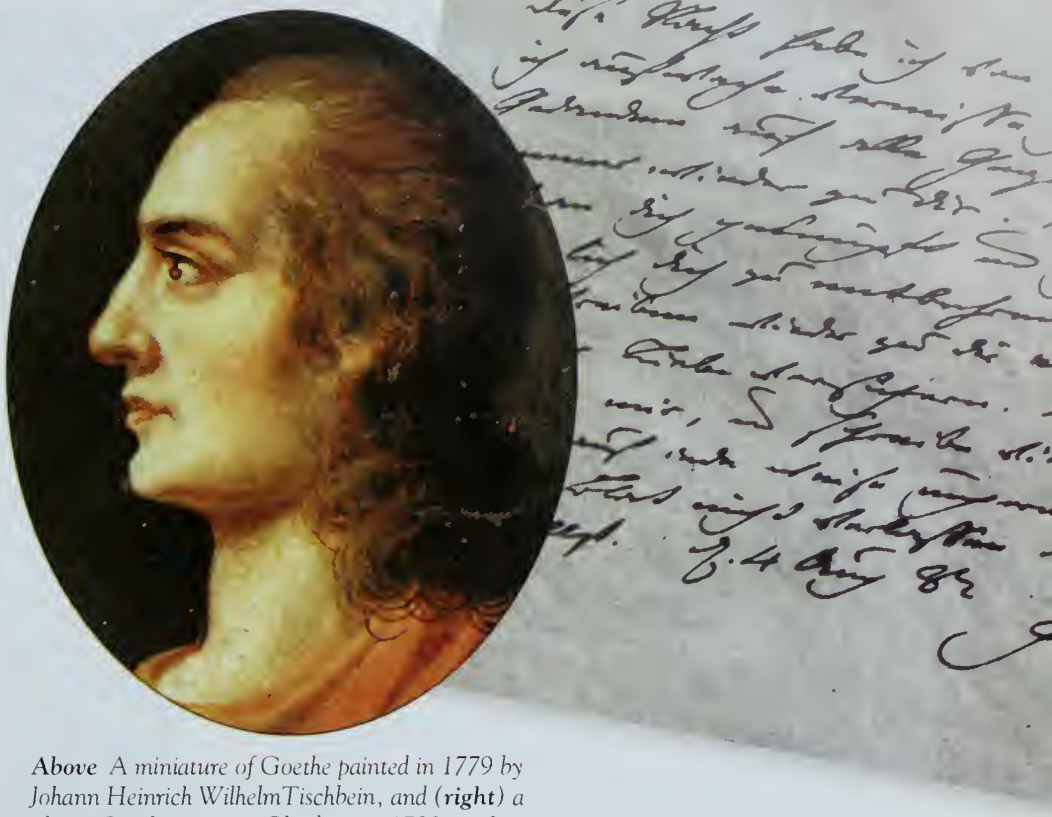
The elephant's skull is coming with me to Weimar.

My rock studies are going very well.

Fritz is happy and good. Without noticing it, he is taken into the world, and so without knowing it, he will become familiar with it. It is still all a game to him; yesterday I got him to read some petitions and give me summaries of them; he laughed like anything and wouldn't believe that people could be in such straits as these petitions made out.

Adieu, you whom I love a thousand times.

Left *Charlotte von Stein in a color engraving made in Weimar by G. Wolf (c.1776).*



Above *A miniature of Goethe painted in 1779 by Johann Heinrich WilhelmTischbein, and* (**right**) *a letter Goethe wrote to Charlotte in 1782, at the height of his passion for her.*

The German playwright, poet, novelist, intellectual, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, met Charlotte von Stein in November 1775. At the age of 33, she was seven years his senior, wife of the duke of Weimar's master-of-horse, and the mother of seven children. She nevertheless responded warmly to Goethe, who was invited to the Weimar court by the duke, Karl August, with whom he became very close friends. For Charlotte von Stein, Goethe's intellectual conversation and broad interests brought a breath of fresh air to provincial Weimar, which was scarcely more than a village surrounding the ducal residence. Goethe in turn fell deeply in love with Charlotte. They began an "affair" that was, for the most part, a true marriage of minds. Ten years after they met, as the letter extracted here illustrates, their relationship was still as intense as when it began. This letter is just one of more than 1,500 letters and notes that Charlotte received from him.

Before Goethe met Charlotte, he was shown a portrait of her, and wrote in response:

> *"It would be a magnificent spectacle to see how the world is reflected in this soul. She sees the world as it is, and yet through the medium of love. And mildness is the predominant impression."*

When they met, he found "mildness" one of her most attractive qualities. In his verses, in which he referred to her as "Lida," he wrote of the peace and serenity she brought him. They apparently shared more than this. As Goethe wrote:

> *"We first know we exist when we recognize ourselves in others."*

Right *Goethe and Charlotte's son, Fritz, his pupil from 1783, in a contemporary silhouette (artist unknown). Not believing in formal education, Goethe chose to bring up Fritz himself.*

Charlotte kept the relationship firmly within the bounds permitted by late 18th-century German society. With her husband away from home, often for days at a time, Goethe was her devoted attendant. She, in turn, was his idealized love. In a letter he wrote her in September 1776—the year after they met—he clearly expressed the strain he felt at having to maintain a socially acceptable distance from her, as decorum required:

"Why should I torture you, dearest creature? Why deceive myself and plague you? We cannot be anything to each other, and we are too much to each other..."

After six years of a steadily deepening friendship, Goethe wrote a letter on March 12, 1781, which suggests a turning point in their relationship, and points to liaisons having taken place:

"My soul has grown fast to yours.... I am inseparable from you, and...neither height nor depth can keep me from you. I wish there were some sort of vow or sacrament that would make me yours, visibly or legally. And my period of probation was long enough to think it all over."

As described in the letter written three years later, extracted here, their relationship continued unresolved. Goethe became tutor to Charlotte's son, Fritz, in 1783, which gave him further contact with her. He found consolation in the idealized image of Charlotte, present to him even when she was not there. Yet he declared himself lonely.

From about 1780 on, his creative spirit seems to have dimmed, perhaps because he felt stifled by his emotional dependence on Charlotte. His poetry from this period is more pedantic, and though he wrote a few plays for the entertainment of the court, most of his time was devoted to official duties and the scientific study of anatomy, botany, and geology. By 1785, he blamed Weimar, and perhaps Charlotte, for his unfulfilled hopes:

"I cannot and will not bury my talents,"

he wrote.

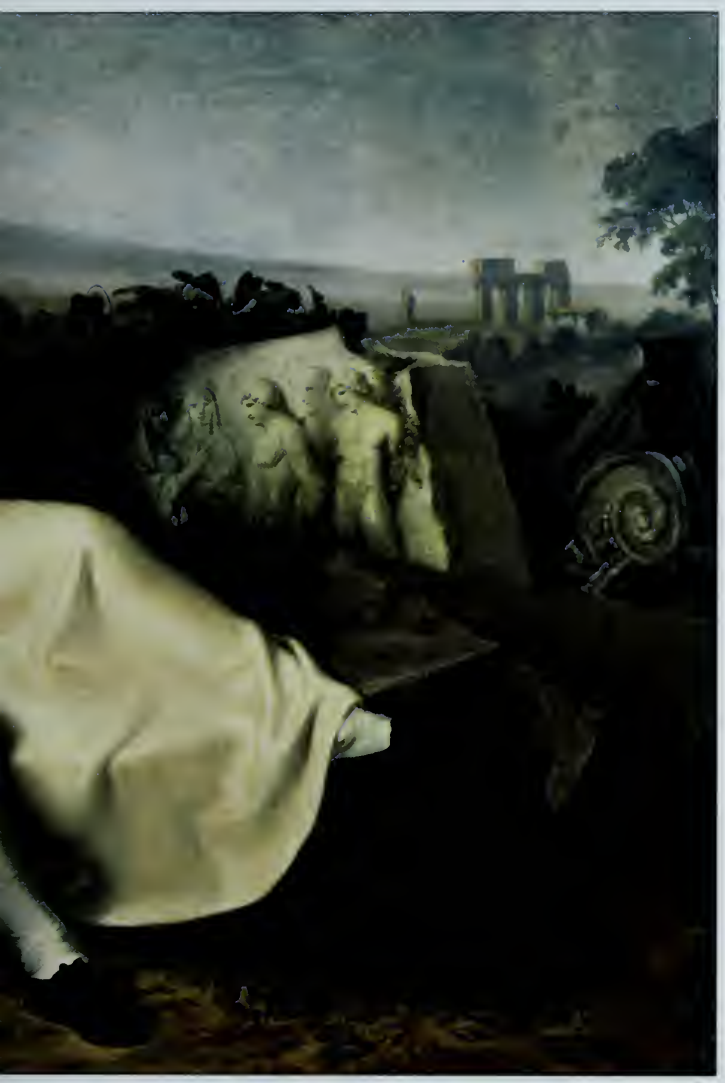
The following year, while vacationing in Karlsbad, Bohemia, Goethe suddenly left for Italy, incognito. He stayed for nearly two years, steeping himself in classical culture, as well as in the country's atmosphere and warmth. In letters home—he wrote to Charlotte nearly every day—he said he felt reborn:

"Though still the same as ever, I feel transformed to the innermost marrow."

He returned to Weimar in 1788. Charlotte—instead of being joyful—reproached him for having been away.

Left *Goethe's garden house, in the grounds of Weimar park. He would retreat to the peace and quiet of this cottage—shaded by trees that he planted himself—to study and write his books and papers.*

Below *Goethe's writing implements, which he used to write countless letters to his muse and inspiration, Charlotte von Stein.*



Above Goethe in the Campagna, *painted by J. H. W. Tischbein in 1787 during Goethe's two-year stay in Italy, a visit that profoundly changed his thinking, and had a major impact on his relationship with Charlotte.*

The Lovers

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe
(1749–1832)
is regarded by many as a German literary genius. Brought up in Frankfurt-am-Main, he studied law in Leipzig and Strassburg. In 1774 he wrote the popular *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers (The Sorrows of Young Werther)*, which caused a sensation. From 1775 on he lived in Weimar, where he met and fell in love with Charlotte von Stein, inspiration for the heroine of his play *Iphigenie auf Tauris* (1787) and Natalie in his *Wilhelm Meister* novels. He spent two years (1786–88) in Italy, then returned to Weimar. In 1808 he produced the first part of his most famous work, *Faust* (1808; part II, 1832). He also wrote works on botany and biology, an autobiography, *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, and a collection of verses, *West-Östlicher Divan* (1819), among many other writings. In addition, his official duties at the Weimar court included director of the war department, adviser to the duke, and director of mines and all scientific and artistic institutions, including the theater.

Charlotte von Stein (née von Schardt)
(1742–1827)
was the eldest daughter of Weimar's master of court ceremonies. In 1758 she became lady-in-waiting to the duchess, Anna Amalia, and in 1764 married Friedrich, Freiherr von Stein, equerry to Duke Karl August. In 1775—the mother of seven children— she met Goethe. The following year she began an intimate friendship with him that lasted some 13 years. An accomplished singer and artist, she was also well read, and in 1776 wrote a humorous piece, *Rino*, on Goethe and the women of the court. Their friendship ended after Goethe's two- year visit to Italy without her. Four years later, in 1792, she wrote a prose tragedy, *Dido* (published 1867), which contains many references to her break with him.

Despite all the letters he had written to her from Italy, she felt excluded from the experience that had produced such an effect on him. In response to her reproaches, Goethe wrote:

> *"If you could but listen to me, I would gladly tell you, that although your reproaches pain me at the moment, they leave no trace of anger in my heart against you."*

In response to another letter from her shortly afterward he wrote:

> *"And it must be by a miracle indeed if I should have forgotten the best, the deepest relation of all, that, namely, to thee....But I freely confess that the manner in which you have treated me hitherto is not to be endured..."*

That year Goethe met a young woman, Christiane Vulpius, who became his mistress. For 13 years Charlotte had been his Romantic ideal, a kindred spirit and a muse. But she could not forgive him. She rejected his offers of friendship, and ridiculed him in public. Christiane, by contrast, was loving and affectionate. She remained loyal to Goethe for 18 years—and bore him several children—before they finally got married in 1806. Charlotte, some 13 years after the rift with Goethe, confessed her continued love for him in a letter to her son on January 12:

> *"I did not know that our former friend Goethe was still so dear to me that a severe illness from which he has been suffering for nine days, would so deeply affect me....I have shed many tears over him in the last few days; I deeply regret now that when he wished to visit me on New Year's Day, I, alas! because I lay ill with headache, excused myself, and now I shall perhaps never see him again."*